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Interagency AssessmentSoviet Military Options in the Lebanese CrisisI. Soviet Actions

The Soviet reaction to the war in Lebanon has been along predictable lines. Publicly the USSR has held the US and Israel equally responsible for the Israeli action. On the diplomatic level.

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Soviets are believed to have assured continued support for the Assad regime while cautioning Assad not to become involved in a major war with Israel.

*This assessment has been prepared under the auspices of the NIO/USSR-EE and has been coordinated at the working level by CIA, DIA, NSA, State/INR, Army, Air Force and the Marine Corps.

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II. Soviet Objectives

The Soviets have a large stake in preserving their position in Syria, which now provides their best entrée to the Middle East. They will therefore seek to protect this presence, and to capitalize upon opportunities provided by the crisis to extend their influence both in Syria and the region as a whole. Their immediate aim will be to deter an Israeli attack on Syria itself.

The rapid pace of developments in the region means that the Soviets will have to make key decisions quickly. On the diplomatic and propaganda fronts, the Soviets will support the ceasefire and seize whatever opportunities there are to embarrass the United States and depict the USSR as the main supporter of the Arab cause. In the military area, Soviet actions will be affected by their own capabilities, the evolving character of the fighting, and their assessment of Israeli intentions and possible US actions.

III. Soviet Capabilities

The Soviets could begin to send additional military advisers and technicians into Syria [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] It would take them about two days to airlift a SAM regiment with its equipment. Should they decide to send in airborne forces, it would take them approximately two days to airlift an airborne division (if they could overfly Turkey), or even longer if they had to overfly Hungary and Yugoslavia. [REDACTED]

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IV. Likely Soviet Military Actions

There is broad agreement within the Intelligence Community that the Soviets will take at least two military steps:

1. Resupply the Syrians with equipment destroyed by the Israelis, if they have not already begun to do so.

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2. Provide additional technicians to assist Syrian air defense forces.

The Community also believes that if the ceasefire does not hold, and the Israelis resume their offensive, there is a better than even chance that the Soviets will send SAM units of their own into Syria, although not necessarily to areas most threatened by Israeli attacks. Even if the ceasefire holds, there is a good possibility that the Soviets will move to augment air defenses in Syria with Soviet units.

Moscow would probably view the dispatch of tactical fighter units to Syria as riskier than the dispatch of SAM units. If the Soviets overflow Turkey or Iran and Iraq, which is likely because of time considerations, advance elements of Soviet tactical fighter units from the Transcaucasus could be committed to limited combat operations in Syria in less than 24 hours. With no Israeli air opposition, Soviet fighter aircraft theoretically could fly into Syrian airfields that support similar types of aircraft, refuel, arm, and conduct a combat sortie on the same day. But it is highly unlikely they would commit their units to combat operations before establishing their command, communication and logistic systems, which would take a minimum of two days.

If the ceasefire between Israel and Syria does not hold, the Soviets will again be under increasing pressure from their Syrian allies to provide a contingent of combat troops, as and if

- Air strikes in Syria increase and cover more than SAM sites.
- The Israelis move further north in the Bekaa Valley to the Beirut-Damascus highway, threatening the approaches to the Syrian capital from Lebanon.
- Ground fighting extends into Syria, either from Lebanon or across the Golan Heights.

The main purpose of sending in airborne or other combat troops, from the Soviet standpoint, would probably be the deterrent effect their presence might have on Israel, the pressure this would place on Washington to attempt to rein in the Israelis, the support it would render to Assad, and the protection it would provide for Soviet operations in Syria. However, the Soviets know that their force would be vulnerable to

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Israeli action both while it was being inserted and also after it was deployed--a Soviet airborne force would be no match for Israeli armor.

Faced with this uncertain calculation, and realizing that the Syrians have nowhere else to turn anyway, the Soviets would try to use the possibility of introducing airborne troops as a means of restraining the Israelis.

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If a ceasefire appears to hold, the Soviets may still deploy small contingents of combat troops. They would claim credit for forcing the ceasefire by putting in such token elements in symbolic defensive positions well away from the potential combat area. This posture would improve their bargaining position in overall Middle East negotiations and increase their influence with Syria.

On the other hand, if the ceasefire breaks down, and particularly if it appears that the Syrians are facing a major defeat, the Soviet decision would be more difficult but would probably still lead to the same conclusion: a politically significant dispatch of combat troops on the assumption that the Israelis will be deterred from attacking them by the dangerous nature of that step and by probable pressure from Washington.

The general conclusions are:

- There is a virtual certainty of resupply operations, which may already have begun. Additional Soviet technicians will probably be introduced at the same time.
- There is a good possibility that the Soviets will move to augment air defenses in Syria with Soviet units even if the ceasefire holds.
- There is a better than even chance that the Soviets will send SAM units of their own into Syria if the ceasefire does not hold and the Israelis resume their offensive.

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- There is a somewhat smaller chance that the Soviets would dispatch tactical fighter units to Syria, which they would view as riskier than the introduction of SAM units.
- There is an even chance that if the ceasefire breaks down, and if the Syrians are facing a major defeat, the Soviets would dispatch at least limited ground combat forces; but there is a low probability that they would become actively involved in combat operations.

In any event, we believe that the Soviet presence and strength in Syria will increase as a result of the fighting in Lebanon.

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